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ABSTRACT

A small group of college students studying writing in English as a second language was assigned a written report on the university's contributions to the community. The required tasks included compilation of data, delivery of oral reports, composition of the research report, group communication, revision of drafts, documentation of sources, and peer editing. The assignment was made in the form of a fictitious letter from the university president requesting that the recipients form a committee to prepare a joint report on the subject. The letter outlined a tentative working schedule and provided supporting documents. The students chose to work independently on a study of the different faculties and to combine their findings into a full report later. Class meetings were spent outlining strategies, discussing problems and methodology, and giving progress reports. The assignment had the multiple advantages of providing motivation for students to work on a joint project while focusing on their own individual writing development, using useful technical writing skills, and learning more about their academic fields. (MSE)

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Simulation or Reality?

A Group Project in Writing

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While the worth of role-plays and problem solving activities has long been recognized in the literature on language teaching (Hodgson 1972, Maley and Duff 1978, Ur 1981), very little documentation exists to describe the potential uses of group simulations in language instruction. A fixed repertoire of rather simple simulations structured around exceptionally fantastic situations (Lost on the Moon, Shipwrecked on a Desert Island, Fallout Shelter) (Taylor 1982) appear to be stock items in the ESL teacher's grab bag of instructional techniques. Typically, these activities emphasize oral interactions amongst groups of learners who might negotiate towards a group consensus during a few hours of classroom study. Their pedagogical virtues are (somewhat vaguely) justified on the grounds that simulations "can reduce the artificiality of the classroom, provide a reason for talking, and allow the learner to talk meaningfully to other learners" (Sturtridge 1981: 126). Beyond this, we have seen few descriptions of educational endeavours which relate role-play simulations to, say, the teaching of specific language functions (as in Candlin, Burton, Leather and Woods 1981), 'authentic' communicative interactions (Breen 1982), the contextual

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constraints which make 'writing process' techniques meaningful (Britton 1970: 141-149), or (as in this paper) relevant situational data in the learners' environment.

The simulation described here was conducted with a small group of learners who participated in a course for second language students of English registered in regular degree programmes at Carleton University during the summer of 1983. The activities were devised to suit the diverse interests of six students with readily identifiable academic goals as well as to adhere to the course's aims of offering instruction in forms of writing typical of an academic setting. In general terms, the simulation was a project which asked students to prepare a joint report documenting the university's contributions to the local community. Specifically, the technique of group-simulation achieved a variety of instructional objectives simultaneously. The tasks required to complete the project possessed mechanisms to promote the students' assumption of responsibilities for: compilation of appropriate data, delivery of oral reports, consideration of purpose and effect while composing a research report, group-conferencing, revision of drafts, documentation of sources, and peer-editing (see Figure 1).

The simulation was carried out over two weeks, centering around classes which met on alternate weekdays for periods of two hours. On the first day, the participants each received copies of a fictitious letter addressed to them from the president of the university (see Appendix A) requesting that the recipients of the letters form a committee to prepare a joint report on the university's contributions to the local community. The president's letter outlined a tentative working schedule for the committee to follow, designated the class's teacher as an advisor for consultation during the committee meetings, and imparted a heightened significance to the project by attatching a (fictitious) memorandum from the Minister of Education (see Appendix B) which threatened

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Figure 1:
Overview of the Simulation

	Class Activities	Learning Behaviour
Week One		
1.	- introduction of task - formation of student committee to plan for execution of project	- interpretation of task - development of strategies - for data collection
2.	- initial progress reports on data collection - discussion of problems common to committee members	- sharing of information about processes for collecting data - decision-making on the types of data appropriate for the project
3.	- second progress reports - discussion of uniform format	- decision-making on the format and content of individual reports
Week Two		
4.	- submission of rough drafts of individual reports - peer reading of drafts - consensus on suggestions after revisions	- revision techniques and strategies - refinement and appreciation of content in relation to form and purpose
5.	- submission of revised drafts - peer reading of drafts - consensus on further suggestions for revisions	- revision techniques and strategies - refinement and appreciation of content in relation to form and purpose
6.	- submission of final copies of individual reports - proofreading of peers' reports - compiling into joint-report	- proofreading techniques and strategies

closure of the university unless she received a report which could persuade her against such action. The advisor/teacher suggested the participants organize a committee by electing a chairperson and a recording secretary who would direct the group to consider their interpretations of the scope of the task, to recommend procedures for collecting appropriate data, and to compose a memorandum to the president of the university indicating how the committee intended to undertake the task. The participants decided to prepare individual reports representing the perspectives of their various faculties and to compose these later into the joint report.

At the next meeting the committee reconvened to discuss mutual accomplishments and difficulties in obtaining source documents and data. Each committee member contributed an oral 'progress report' on their efforts, which proved valuable to other individuals who had perhaps not discovered such potential sources as the university's archives, annual reports, or information offices. In addition to sharing strategies for the collection of printed data, participants decided to interview the chairmen or advisors in their respective departments at the university in order to elicit details on certain common points like the number of staff employed, research projects recently undertaken, and consultancy services offered.

At the third session greater emphasis was placed on the appropriateness of the data to the purposes of the project. A number of points presented by individuals in their second progress reports were deemed unnecessary or irrelevant by other members of the committee. For instance, financial statements produced by one student were dismissed by another since the "president" of the university had indicated he would handle this matter. Discussions focused on the necessity for each report to contain roughly equivalent types and quantities of information in order for the joint report to cohere effectively. The committee reached a consensus on a

uniform format for the presentation of material in each report so as to direct their preparation of written drafts for the following meeting. The committee chairmen listed categories of items on a blackboard; the appropriateness of each was debated until an agreement was established that the categories of departmental background, employment, community services, consulting services, research, and publications would make a suitable basis for organizing individual reports. By this point, each person had collected sufficient data to meet the satisfaction of their peers as well as the constraints of the task, each had experienced opportunities to articulate and organize material for an interested audience, and each had developed this material to accomodate any alterations in content or emphasis suggested by their fellow participants.

The second week of simulation concentrated on activities of writing, revising, and editing. In the fourth meeting each member of the committee read the initial drafts of reports written by other committee-members. Recommendations for development, re-organization or clarification were made by the participants. Since many of the drafts were in relatively rough forms, the authors took this opportunity to voice their intentions concerning further development of their work, taking special notice of the techniques used by peers who had produced comparatively more successful efforts. In the fifth session, more peer-editing and suggestions for revisions of second drafts took place. As the image of the report in its entirety was becoming more evident to the participants, students were prompted to focus further on the need for a uniform pattern of organization in individual papers. The importance of co-operative effort in determining the successful completion of the project became a justification and stimulus for students to produce 'editorial' comments recommending improvements in others' papers.

At the final meeting, members of the committee organized themselves in pairs to studiously proof-read the final copies

of the reports. When a pair was unable to reach agreement on a possible correction or alteration, the committee's advisor/teacher was consulted to arbitrate the decision. A subcommittee was later formed to compose a covering letter to the president of the university announcing the project's completion. The representative from the Department of Mathematics was called upon to arrange the individual papers in numerical sequence. The joint report was typed verbatim from the students' papers by office staff in the following week and copies were distributed to all interested parties. Minor errors which appeared in the final text formed a basis for 'remedial' instruction in later classes. (For a sample page from the completed project, see Appendix C.)

From a methodological perspective this simulation concentrated class attention on a single project which consisted of various tasks that appeared to encourage individual development in writing. The stimulus for the project was sufficiently believable, realistic, and engaging to motivate students to collect appropriate material, to write convincingly, and to improve their writing to meet these ends. As a result of the tasks, individuals had chances to find out more about their fields of academic specialization and the relationship of these fields to the university and local community. They also took pride in their personal and collaborative accomplishments and discoveries. The framework for group activities promoted a classroom atmosphere where problem-solving and consensus-establishing evolved spontaneously, permitting learners to build upon their peers' contributions as well as to experiment with, sound out, and confer on their own efforts.[1] Above all, the simulation directed learners toward assuming roles as compilers of information, composers, editors, critics, amd proof-readers—roles they were able to

[1] See, for instance, Crowhurst 1981, Graves 1983, or Judy and Judy 1981 on writing workshops; Witbeck 1976 or Zamel 1982 on peer revision and writing 'process' techniques for ESL students; Courteney 1982 for a rationale of drama-oriented procedures to teaching.

perceive as integral to the preparation of any 'real' written assignment they might encounter.

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APPENDIX A
Stimulus A

Carleton University
Ottawa, Canada K1S 5B6

SIMULATION

August 2, 1983

Dear

I am writing to ask if you could act as a representative on the committee now being formed to prepare a joint report requested by the Ontario Ministry of Education on Carleton University's contributions to "the education, welfare and betterment of the Ottawa community". Please find enclosed a copy of a memorandum recently sent to me by the Minister of Education, which I believe should impress upon you the urgency and significance of this task.

I have arranged for you to meet with the five other persons invited to form this committee on August 3rd, at 2:00 p.m. in Paterson Hall, Room 226. I suggest that you prepare a tentative working plan on this date, outlining how the committee will proceed in researching and documenting this information. If each member could contribute a progress report on August 5th, a draft report on August 8th, then completed individual reports on August 10th, I am sure that you will be able to compile and edit the individual reports on the latter date in order to meet the deadline of August 12th for a joint report.

The committee will probably wish to concentrate on gathering information from library and departmental sources. Limitations of time will prohibit the compilation of a thoroughly detailed report; however, adequate resources exist to allow for the preparation of a general statement, and each member of the committee should be able to work from the perspective of his or her department's role at the university.

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Carleton University
Ottawa, Canada K1S 5B6

I extend my apologies for not being able to work directly with this committee, as the Ministry of Education has also requested that my office prepare a report on the state of the university's finances.

Mr. Alister Cumming of the Centre for Applied Language Studies has been designated to advise the committee during its proceedings as well as to accept the final report in my absence.

Thanking you in advance,

Sincerely,

P.W. Smithson
President,
Carleton University

c.c. Ayoub Ayoub, Engineering
Irene Corbin, Social Work
Rosa Maria Bruno, Spanish
Ana Isabel Guada, Sociology
Adel Fahmy Mishail, Mathematics
Keiko Sueuchi, Political Science

APPENDIX B
Stimulus B

SIMULATION

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO

MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 25, 1983

TO: Mr. P.W. Smithson, President,
Carleton University

FROM: Ms. Hildegard Right,
Minister of Education,
Province of Ontario

RE: OPERATION OF CARLETON UNIVERSITY

Following conversations of July 22 with your office and the staff of the Ministry of Education, plans have been implemented which will result in the cessation of further operations at Carleton University by September 1st, 1983 unless evidence of the university's role in contributing to the education, welfare and betterment of the Ottawa community can be documented before August 12th of this year.

I suggest that you request the formation of a committee (possibly consisting of representatives from the areas of Sociology, Social Work, Engineering, Mathematics, Political Science and Foreign Language Teaching) to issue a joint report detailing the services which these areas of academic study contribute toward the general population.

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APPENDIX C

Sample from the Completed Project

INTRODUCTION

This report is prepared according to the request of Mr. Ayoub Ayoub, Chairman of the committee established by P.W. Smithson, President of Carleton University, under the purpose for examining the contribution of Carleton University to the community of Ottawa. My enrollment in this committee is to analyze, in particular, the role of the Department of Political Science in the capital community. This paper is mainly based on the records at the Archives of Macdoram Library (Carleton University), interviews from a graduate secretary and graduates in the department.

This Department of Political Science works on two major functions as a public institution: promoting the research in the field of Political Science, and educating students in courses.

The department is constituted of three levels: under graduate, M.A., and Ph.D courses. In the year of 1982-83, 147 students were in the undergraduate program as full-time students, and 29 students as part-time. In the graduate school combining M.A. and Ph. D. courses, there were 68 students who registered as full-time.

The academic program of the department covers the courses in five fields: Canadian Politics, Comparative Politics, Political Theory, International Relations and Public Administration. These programs include theoretical, empirical, philosophical and quantitative approaches. Also there are interdisciplinary courses for area studies.

EMPLOYMENT

In the department, there are 41 professors. Also there are usually some foreign professors sent under international exchange programs. For the administration of the department, there are 11 secretaries.

For supporting the study of graduates as well as preparing for their career, the department gives lectureship, Teaching Assistant and Research Assistant systems. Some Ph. D. candidates started teaching courses on undergraduate level. For example, Alex Netherton, who had finished the qualification of Ph. D. program, taught the course of Intergovernmental Relations on 300 level last semester.

People who finished the graduate program at the department, in particular those got Ph. D. degree, found teaching jobs at universities including Carleton. Some of the graduates went into public service. Hence, a certain number of people from Political Science at Carleton still stay in Ottawa for their work.[1]

SERVICE PROVIDED BY THE DEPARTMENT

a) Studies and Research

Many pieces of work relating to the community of Ottawa have been done by the faculties in the department. This scholarship ...

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